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# Turkey as 'a *positive Other*': A theoretical discussion to comprehend the British media's view on Turkey-EU relations

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## **ABSTRACT**

*No country has waited at the front door of the EU as long as Turkey yet. In addition to Turkey's different status compared to the EU membership candidacy processes of other countries, there is also an awkward relationship between the EU and the UK, and inevitably the British media. Therefore, this article seeks to present an analytical framework which draws on the notion of "a positive Other" while explaining the representation of Turkey's EU bid in the British media. The research discusses the inadequacy of Orientalism and Self/Other nexus to understand the context in the British coverage and highlights the "essentialist" and "functionalist" approaches in its attempt to explain the differences within the EU in exploring the fundamentals of the EU and the view about Turkish membership.*

*Keywords: Turkey; the EU; the British media; Orientalism; a positive Other*

## **Introduction**

Turkey's most recent failed attempt to become a member of the European Union in the first decade of this century occasioned a great deal of soul searching and comment amongst European intellectuals, media commentators and political actors. It opened up a whole series of discussions about what it meant to be European and about the nature of the essence of the European Union and the idea of a united Europe. It also occasioned much reflection on the historical relations - and boundaries - between Europe/ the West and the Ottoman Empire / Turkey / the East.

Whilst all these discussions were challenging and valuable in highlighting complex issues of identity and place - Who is European? Where is Europe? Who is not European, and so on - there were some other areas of enquiry that set off different concerns. One of these was the very different perspectives or approaches to the subject of Turkey's accession that could be found amongst different members of the European Union. So, for example, there were some differences between the ways in which the British political establishment, including the media, looked at the question of accession and the French or German establishment. Although all, in one way or another, sought to place the discussion within the context of a wider discussion about the EU's future identity and the rationale of European integration<sup>1</sup>, at base the discussion was about the nature of Europe and of Turkey as the 'other'.

Such an approach to exploring Turkey's failed application has certainly proved fruitful and has produced a large body of work. However, we would argue that the Self-

Other approach is perhaps too crude to take in the much more complex representation of Turkey in political discourse. For example: the majority of news organisations in the British media were in favour of Turkey's membership of the EU.<sup>2</sup> The tone of coverage was mostly positive since the British media saw the EU as a predominantly economic entity and also as a cosmopolitan union. This representation of the EU, it could be argued, is very much a *functionalist* one. Yet, and at the same time, the very same news organisations continuously highlighted Turkey's differences from Europe, including its oriental and religious character.

Exploring the representation of Turkey in the British media within a framework that highlights the 'Self' - Europe, Britain - and the 'Other' - Turkey, the Orient - overlooks the fact that much of the coverage took a *positive* view of Turkey's membership. We would argue, therefore, that it is necessary to look at the representation of Turkey - certainly within the context of the British media - through a different lens; not one that ignores the insights and contributions of the Self-Other but one that highlights the notion of 'a *positive* Other'. The aim of this article is to develop and extend the notion of a '*positive* Other' in such a way as to permit us to better understand the representation of Turkey's troubled relationship with Europe as represented in the British press. Rather than seeing that relationship as being composed by immovable and unchanging opposites, the notion of 'a *positive* Other' allows for a more nuanced understanding of representations and, in so doing, providing a more nuanced commentary on Turkey's place within Europe<sup>3</sup>.

The second part of this paper briefly explores some of the findings from studies of media coverage of Turkey's bid to join the EU before we turn, in the third part of the paper, to outlining the idea of 'a positive Other' as a contribution to a better understanding of media content. In the fourth part we provide findings from our own study to support our argument. The final part of this paper returns to a discussion of the usefulness of the notion to better understand how Turkey-EU relations is represented in the British media.

### **The Existing Literature on the Media Representation of Turkey-EU Relations**

Studies of the media representation of Turkey's EU bid have tended to focus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2005 process when Turkey started its membership negotiations with the EU<sup>4</sup>. Whilst many of these studies draw on the idea of the Other and on Edward Said's work on Orientalism to explain their findings<sup>5</sup>, the majority are based on empirical work rather than very developed theoretical frameworks.

Those studies which specifically focus on the British press show that the general tone of the news items published in the UK are, by and large, in favour of Turkey's EU bid<sup>6</sup>. This does not mean that the opposition discourse and the drawbacks of Turkish membership are not portrayed. For instance, some studies<sup>7</sup> show that the Orientalist discourse dominates the British coverage on Turkey. Nevertheless, in the British media representation of Turkey, the negative and critical elements are always articulated alongside a positive overall tone compared to the representation in the Franco-German media:

What is indeed striking in the British [media] debate is that all negative arguments on Turkey's democratic deficits and status as a cultural misfit are recognised by

most authors but the conclusions differ profoundly from those of the Turco-sceptic agenda of continental European debates.<sup>8</sup>

The reason for the differences between the two can be categorised by Franco-German media's *essentialist* and the British media's *functionalist* understanding of the EU. When compared with the British media, the continental European press is more likely to designate Turkey as the Other and the recontextualisation of the dichotomies 'Orient and Occident, tradition and modernity, civilisation and barbarism' is more common in the news items concerning Turkey-EU relations.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst the differences between the Franco-German axis and the Anglo-Saxon perspective highlight the continuing divergence between two different visions of Europe – 'between a politically integrated European federal state (*Bundesstaat*) and an intergovernmental association of sovereign nation-states (*Staatenbund*)'<sup>10</sup> – they also reveal different perspectives on Turkey and, by extension, Turkey's possible future within the EU. Rather than seeing Turkey as simply 'the Other', we wish to argue that we need a more nuanced understanding of the process of 'Othering' that allows for the possibility of 'the Other' also having positive attributes. This, it follows, would then permit for a better understanding of the way in which British media represented Turkey during its bid for accession. We return to this in our discussion and after we offer an exploration of the notion of 'a positive Other'.

### **'A Positive Other'**

Since Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the term 'l'égo et l'autre', the concepts 'the Self' and 'the Other' have received significant attention from those who explore the question of identity, especially in disciplines such as cultural studies, media studies, international relations, sociology and history.<sup>11</sup> Most often, the concepts are used to signify opposites, to categorise opposites. There are many examples of this. Jean Paul Sartre, amongst others, highlighted the importance of the Other in explaining the formation of the Self. Foucault put forth the necessity of looking at who the Others are in order to understand the sane and the mad.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of a discussion of this paper, one can turn to the work of Edward Said to illustrate how he saw the European Self being empowered by degrading its Oriental Other<sup>13</sup>. Other commentators have also drawn attention to this and to the consequent differences and clashes between the European Self and its Other and the ways in which these have been constructed.<sup>14</sup>

In these, and other ways, the Self has been juxtaposed against the Other; an Other that is different, and different and opposite in a negative and foreign way. The possibility that the Other may have a *positive* dimension has been less readily explored even though the term 'a *positive* other' was coined as far back as 1991 by Neumann and Welsh.<sup>15</sup> Our argument is that we can use this term as a useful addition to our analytical framework for understanding representations of Turkey in, at the very least, British media during the period of its claims to accession.

### **The Other is not fixed, static or unchanging**

There are several interconnecting ideas that contribute to a discussion of the much more nuanced discussion of the Other. Aside from the principle one of the possibility of the Other being 'a positive Other', it is also important to consider the possibility that the

Other - as with the Self - is not permanently fixed but in a continual process of change, especially as both face one another in an ever changing global environment. In other words, rather than seeing the Self and Other as always remaining the same, it is more helpful to see them as in flux and in fluid relationships.

According to Neumann and Welsh '[...] one should not rule out the possibility of turning a traditionally apposite Other into a *positive* Other, with which one could have mutually fruitful interaction'.<sup>16</sup> One example of the way this has been used can be found in studies of international relations even though such studies do not refer to it directly. In their works on liberal constructivism in International Relations theory Wendt, Rumelili and Tekin<sup>17</sup> explore the idea that the Other should not always necessarily be seen as a dangerous entity. In this respect, 'the contingency and the transformability' [of the self and other] are the key points highlighted by liberal constructivists while understanding the relationship between the Self and the Other.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside the idea of 'contingency', the idea that the Other is rarely ever fixed and unchanging has also provided some fruitful avenues of research. Michael Billig makes the point that Others - since there are varieties of Others - may have specific characteristics and different relationships with the Self and different proximities to the Self<sup>19</sup>. Their non-static character in relation to the Self underpins the formation of 'a *positive* Other'.

Such discussions suggest a dynamic character to the practice of Othering in the sense that, in the words of Edward Said, 'each age and society recreates its Others'.<sup>20</sup> However, such an approach to understanding Others/the Other is at times in contradiction to views that seem to express a more fixed and unchanging relationship between the Self/Other as in some accounts of Said's more general discussion of Orientalism: Hobson, drawing on the work of Said, writes, for example that 'the possibility of cosmopolitan interaction between the West and East becomes seemingly impossible given that the former's identity has been defined negatively against the latter through the construction of orientalism'.<sup>21</sup> Yet, changes in the world and expectations in politics may alter the status of the Other again suggesting a more dynamic process.<sup>22</sup>

The dynamic process, the contingency and transformability is captured in Tekin's work<sup>23</sup> which illustrates the shifting nature of identification from negative to positive which may lead the Other to become an extension of the Self in the long run. For instance, the problematic relationships between Germany and France, Britain and Europe, and Eastern and Western Europe were resolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Turkey itself is a good example of this type of transformation:

With the demise of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the 1908 revolution of the Young Turks and the defeat in World War I, a representation of Turkey began to take shape as a normalizing and modernizing nation and, with its entry into NATO, even as a trusted ally. More important, in being represented as a case of normalization, the transformation from a sick to a reborn and young body politic also made 'the Turk' less central as a constitutive other.<sup>25</sup>

The resolutions in Europe and Turkey's transformation concerning its relationship with the European Self show that political, economic, and geographical circumstances and conditions make the Other changeable. Although, as part of its *raison d'être*, the Other should be, to some degree, different from the Self, the relationship between the two

does not have to be antagonistic<sup>26</sup> nor inferior. According to Tekin, the aim of the Self is not to define itself as

dependent on the attribution of absolute negativity, as it has been suggested by some earlier constructivist works. In this view, it is the absolute or radical difference of the Other that accomplishes its constitutive role in the formation of collective identities.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than 'absolute negativity', the representation of the Other can be seen as a 'continuum'.<sup>28</sup>

Along this continuum, relations of identity and difference, and cooperation and conflict are assumed to co-vary. In negative identification, self sees the other as different, threatening, and inferior, and their relations are characterised by conflict and the ever-present possibility of war. In positive identification, the other is seen as similar, and as a non-threatening extension of self, and going to war with the other becomes a non-possibility.<sup>29</sup>

There are circumstances and conditions where such a continuum cannot exist. For instance, if the European Self is associated with *essentialist* characteristics, the transformation of the Other in order to be an extension of the Self would be significantly difficult. Moreover, the Other then requires its differences to be assessed by the Self as temporary and open to transformation. As Rumelili writes

If difference is constructed to be deriving from inherent characteristics (the other as non-self), then the possibilities for change in the 'other' are by definition nonexistent, and the other is placed in a position of permanent difference. If, on the other hand, difference is constructed to be deriving from acquired characteristics (the other as less self), then, by definition, there is the possibility that the other will become like self one day, so the other is only in a position of temporary difference.<sup>30</sup>

Seeing the relationship between the Self and the Other as a continuum does not ignore the very existence of Self/Other nexus as they are the actual reason for the emergence of 'a *positive* Other'.

Having explained what we mean by 'a *positive* Other' and the similar points in the liberal constructivists' understanding of Self/Other nexus above, it is important to briefly discuss here the inadequacy of Orientalism to explain the coverage on Turkey's EU bid in the British media. Some of the existing research on the media representation of Turkey-EU relations, including the analyses of the British coverage, utilise the notion of Orientalism, especially Said's *Orientalism*, in their theoretical background.<sup>31</sup> This article also benefits from Said's work since it acknowledges *Orientalism's* 'central importance for an investigation of representations of the Islamic world (specifically the Near and Middle East) as the cultural contestant against which 'the West' first had to define itself'.<sup>32</sup> However, it would not be adequate to set an analytical framework only within a view which is interested in an analysis of the exclusion of the Oriental (Turkey) from the Occidental (the EU), or exploring the media representation through the clashes between the Self and the Other.

The long relationship between ‘Europe and the Turk’ is not one of perennial mutual hostility, of an undifferentiated Western anti-Turkish prejudice [...].<sup>33</sup> The relations are often influenced by pragmatic expectations from both sides rather than only *essentialist* goals. On the contrary, Orientalism is mainly based on an analysis of a political doctrine which makes the differences between the East and the West much stronger<sup>34</sup>. It is primarily motivated by the West’s relations with particularly the Arab Muslims within the colonial and post-colonial circumstances. Therefore, drawing on Orientalism or other theoretical approaches which focus on ‘othering’ in the context of Turkey-EU relations in the British media fails to see a crucial point concerning ‘the British exceptionalism’,<sup>35</sup> namely the Eurosceptic character of the British media and the awkward relationships between the UK and the EU. More importantly, building the analysis only as a critique of the Orientalist discourse in the media coverage beforehand may slant the research outcomes in a negative way.

Consequently, it can be argued that drawing on the Orientalist thought for a study on the representation of Turkey-EU relations in the German or Austrian context, where ‘more exclusivist interpretation of European identity’<sup>36</sup> exists, would be more convenient.<sup>37</sup> Besides, employing the complete version of Said’s approach in *Orientalism* would have been an ideal choice if the case had been on the representation of Morocco’s EU bid in the French or German media. Therefore, the analytical framework, proposed in the study, requires a notion which can explain Turkey’s EU bid in the British coverage beyond simply saying that ‘Turkey is being orientalised’.

### **Turkey as ‘A Positive Other’ in the Context of the British Media**

This section focuses on the rationale behind portraying Turkey as ‘a *positive* Other’ drawing on a study of media coverage of Turkey-EU relations between 1999 – Turkey’s acceptance as an official EU membership candidate – and 2006 when negotiations effectively ceased. The investigation is based on a qualitative content analysis, covering six important events in six media outlets (See the Appendix for more information on the method and sample).

### **Findings**

Support for Turkey’s bid in the British media was often supported by claims that its accession would make the Western world’s image better in the eyes of the Muslim world or that Turkish membership can make the EU’s communication with the Islamic world better.<sup>38</sup> Prime Minister Blair’s positive comments on welcoming a Muslim country to the EU is a good example of how some British politicians approached the Turkish issue and how the media represented it. Blair claimed, for example, that ‘[t]his is a good day for Europe, Turkey and the wider world’<sup>39</sup> on the day of the start of EU membership negotiations with Turkey.

Other examples found in the British media also clarify the reasons for the British politicians’ support for Turkish membership and why Turkey is represented as ‘a *positive* Other’. If Turkey becomes a member of the EU, it was often stated, ‘no longer will the jihadists be able to speak of the Christian West pitted against the Muslim rest’.<sup>40</sup> Correspondingly, in Blair’s words, Turkish membership is ‘an example of the West’s positive engagement with the Muslim world at a time of heightened tension’.<sup>41</sup> He uses ‘we’ the third plural pronoun in his utterance in order to explain that Muslims and Christians can cooperate and Turkish membership is an important way to realise his

proposal and that 'we can work together'.<sup>42</sup> Turkey's transformation into an in-group country is possible if it functions as a conciliator between the East and the West; if, in other words, it remains as 'a *positive* Other'. Moreover, according to a commentary in *The Guardian*, Turkey's participation in many European events 'from the Champions League and the Eurovision Song Contest to NATO and the Council of Europe'<sup>43</sup> proves that it is an in-group country.

The Self's positive approach, in this case that of the UK and the British media, to the Turkish issue is strongly connected to what the British understand from the EU project. Turkey is a non-threatening *positive* Other in the context of its EU bid because Britain, the Self, considers the similarities between the two to be minimal in respect of the final conditions that they aspire to.<sup>44</sup> Continental Europe's hesitations regarding Turkish membership and how the cultural borders of Europe are going to be defined is not generally an issue in the UK.<sup>45</sup> As a *Guardian* journalist observed:

Britain and Turkey, in many ways, are not similar societies but they have similar relationships to the European project. They are large countries of the periphery. They look outward away from Europe as well as inward towards Europe. The British look across the Atlantic, the Turks look into the Middle East and the Black Sea region. The British are instinctively very comfortable with the notion of a country like Turkey being part of the EU but also having other alliances and other trading partnerships and other relationships [...].<sup>46</sup>

Besides, because of Britain's inclusive understanding of European identity, Turkey's differences from the EU are degraded into some temporary practicalities. These practicalities can be amended according to written values (such as the Copenhagen criteria) and finally, the Other can be part of the Self if it fulfils its responsibilities.

In addition to all these, Turkey's own characteristics also contribute to the UK's and the British media's expectations. Keyman's view summarises a long debate:

Turkey with its ability to achieve the co-existence of Islam, secular modernity and democracy constitutes an alternative modernity, and it is this characteristic of Turkey that creates its recent perception in academic and political discourse as an important actor whose experience of modernity should be taken seriously by any attempt aiming at going beyond the clash of civilisations, beyond the orientalist divide between the West and the East, and more importantly beyond the culturally essentialist and fundamentalist desires to codify difference as the dangerous Other.<sup>47</sup>

It can be argued, therefore, that Turkey has been trying to dispose of its representation as 'the Other' at least since the start of the Republican period.<sup>48</sup> Turkey's representation concerning its EU bid in the British media can be seen as one of the most suitable domains to dispose of Turkey's image as 'the European Other'.

All in all, it can be claimed that the British media tends to cover the issues which represent Turkey as an 'Other' in the European context. However, the same news organisations also accept Turkey as a potential member of the European Self due to their understanding of the EU and their approach to Turkey-EU relations and/or the UK - EU relations *per se*. Accordingly, the representation of Turkey's EU membership in the British media exposes that Turkey can become a member of the EU if only the

membership is considered by a functionalist approach. This view gives importance to the geo-political benefits of Turkish membership for the UK, e.g. Turkey's duty of reaching the Muslim world and acting as a bridge between the two worlds. In this way, Turkey can be a mediator and the EU can reach out to the Other via Turkey. As a result, even though it seems confusing and awkward, the general tone of the content reveals that Turkey's chance to be part of the European Self is dependent on Turkey's characteristics related to its 'Otherness'. These abovementioned points prove that Turkey's EU membership issue in the British media needs a new approach. Orientalism or Self/Other nexus, mentioned and employed in the previous studies on Turkey's EU bid are not sufficient to tell the whole story in the British coverage. For that reason, we argue that the notion of 'a *positive* Other' worked more efficient while contemplating on the representation of Turkey's EU bid in the British media.

## Discussion

This paper has shown that the Other does not have to be a static entity. Its positive relationship with the Self and the changing circumstances which surround the Other's characteristics can make the borders between being the Other and being the Self porous. Therefore, the notion of 'a *positive* Other' does not simply refer to being between the Self and the Other. The notion has to do with an entity that still protects its certain characteristics as an Other, but is also transformed itself by meeting a set of desired norms (e.g. the Copenhagen criteria) in order to be accepted by the Self. Thus, the Other's efforts to make itself 'a *positive* Other' is not possible before the Self admits this transformation. It was proposed in the article that Turkey's EU bid discussions in the British media is one of the suitable examples to explain the conditions above. Therefore, the notion of 'a *positive* Other' was employed in order to conceptualise how Turkey was represented in the British media.

At this stage, it would be meaningful to ask what did the notion of 'a *positive* Other' bring to the existing knowledge in Turkey-EU relations and its media representation? In brief, this analytical tool allows us to contribute significantly to discussions that develop from understandings of the Self/Other nexus and Orientalism. In doing so, we are able to move away from studies which only refer to how Turkey is unmercifully orientalist. Employing the notion of 'a *positive* Other' as we do offers a different way to interpret the data about Turkey-EU relations and/or its representation in the British media *per se*. The approach grounds itself in the different view of the British media compared to the coverage in continental Europe. This point is significantly related to a specific context, where particular representations emerged alongside particular approaches to the EU in general. '*Functionalist*' and '*essentialist*' approaches were employed in the article in order to distinguish different understandings of the EU. It was clearly shown that the overall British coverage evaluates the EU affairs in general with a *functionalist* approach. This type of understanding has an immense influence on the formation of Turkey's media representation as 'a *positive* Other' in the British coverage.

By means of this *functionalist* approach, when the British media represents Turkey as 'a *positive* Other', it not only shapes the representation of Turkey as an Eastern or Western country, it also serves to protect the British identity *vis-à-vis* the EU identity. By portraying a type of Turkey which is suitable for the European Self, the British media proposes that the EU identity can be shaped according to British interests.

Therefore, one can argue that Turkey's representation in the British media as 'a *positive* Other' is firstly useful for the UK's understanding of the EU and its confrontation with the Franco-German axis in the Union. This does not have to do with the British media's employment of Turkey in a context of Self/Other nexus as a way to strengthen its British identity versus the Oriental. Instead, the British media creates its own image of how the EU identity should be by utilising the discussions on Turkey's EU bid.

All in all, the article claims that the representation of Turkey's EU membership in the British coverage cannot be understood by only employing the theoretical discussions covering the Orientalist thought or Self/Other nexus. Turkey's special status between the Eastern and Western world, the UK's awkward relationship with the EU and the British media's overall Eurosceptic approach to EU affairs constitute a perfect domain to apply the notion of 'a *positive* Other'. Therefore, it is a necessity for the studies dealing with the media representation of Turkey's EU bid to draw on 'positive othering' in order to conceptualise Turkey's aforementioned special status in the British media. Even though the representation in the content appears to be supporting Turkey's EU bid in general, one can argue that this is not because Turkey is a *bona fide* European country for the British media. For this reason, it can be claimed that the British media's support for Turkish membership is not genuine but strategic and pragmatic. Consequently, bearing in mind all the discussions in the article, the British media tells us that Turkey is different but not an enemy. Turkey is an Other but a '*positive*' one.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by authors.

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## Notes

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3. The article's ontological standpoint is not that the EU is the zenith of democracy and human rights in the world. The recent economic turmoil and the refugee crisis have shown how much the EU is divided and powerless at times of crisis. However, the paper acknowledges that the EU is one of the most successful peace projects in the last century. Moreover, the EU has played / is playing an

- important role in enhancing the quality of Turkish democracy as Turkey's internal dynamics have never been a sufficient motivator on their own. In other respects, it is important to acknowledge that significant changes have taken place in the political and economic environments of both Turkey and the EU since talks about integration stalled in 2006. In the case of Turkey, these changes have prevented it from playing a more active part in Brussels as it has been pre-occupied with such issues as the 'problematic' election of its President in 2007, the Ergenekon case, the Arab Spring, alleged corruption scandals in government, a dramatic split between Erdoğan and Gülen, the war in Syria and the refugee crisis, and the recent renewal of military operations against the PKK.
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## Appendix: Method and Sample

Empirical findings were collected by using a qualitative content analysis on news items. The answers gathered were coded on NVivo, qualitative analysis software, so as to make connections efficiently between different coded materials. The sample selection for this study was based around six important events in Turkey-EU relations between 1999 when Turkey was accepted as an official EU membership candidate and 2006 when membership negotiations were damaged by the port crisis between Turkey and Cyprus. In order to place these events in context, one week before and one week after the events were included in the time sample. Sundays were excluded. The media outlets that were chosen for the study are *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times* (the *FT*, London edition), the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and BBC News Online.